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Building new self through words

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Building a new self through words

A young boy sits in front of the computer and mumbles verbs in Finnish: *suhista*, *liplattaa*, *kahista*, *surista*. From time to time, he asks people around him to explain the delicate differences between these verbs. The boy is a young rapper, born in Africa, a newcomer to the Finnish hip hop scene. His Finnish is not yet smooth, but he persists in writing his lyrics only in Finnish. He is searching for a perfect rhyme and is especially intrigued with these Finnish onomatopoetic verbs: the movement, the feeling, the sound, and the meaning, all hidden in one single verb. He is fascinated: there are so many words meaning almost the same. How can he see the differences, how can he understand the details in the meanings of these sonically empowered words if the equivalents in his own language(s) are not enough to help him?

This example tells about many crucial things in a youngster's life. It is about connecting the already existing linguistic experience (his native language or languages) to the new one, moving himself to another linguistic surrounding and seeking acknowledgement not only as a speaker in this new environment, but even more ambitiously, acknowledgement as a verbal artist in his new linguistic home. In other words, this young man is searching for his new (linguistic) identity. In case of writing music, the basic human need to express oneself within a group is lifted to an artistic level. One has to think about the genre, about the music (or rhythm, or beat), and simultaneously stay truthful to oneself as an artist. The inner lyrical crafting force is strong enough to break any barrier in learning a new language in order to satisfy the need to express oneself.

Music workshops organised by the project Rimlab offer a nice *mise-en-scène* for youth with musical ambitions. The workshops are sites for creating lyrics and music with help of adult coordinators during weekend-long sessions. The richness of the linguistic background of the young artists makes these workshops special: Finnish, Swedish and Sami speakers are joined by speakers of various other languages. It is in these kinds of workshops that linguistic plurality is seen almost always in a positive way. All the participants realise that they are in a changed linguistic situation. Those who are speakers of some official languages in Finland (Finnish, Swedish, Sami) are ready to be more observant, more sensitive about being understood and getting response. They switch to an adjusted, more sensitive mode that exists in the repertoire of their mother tongue, which they are not aware of in everyday conversations with the speakers of the same language. 'Linguistic newcomers', learners to the languages of Finland on the other hand become by default more sensitive to the in-learning processes. They are also in-between linguistic modes where one's own mother tongue(s) becomes a tool, a support for introducing new language(s). We could also say that a dynamic interaction between a person's linguistic skills is

taking place: some features of Finnish or Swedish can be connected to some already familiar linguistic features that make the person realise the new language is not a mission impossible ("This word in Finnish reminds me of the word my grandma used for...").

Anyone who remembers how great it feels to be understood in a foreign language or to get that facial expression from the other clearly saying, "Yes, I know where you are going with that..", has had an experience which helps language learning. This feeling is worth cherishing and exploring. Realising how we can easily communicate with just the basic knowledge of one language makes us comprehend how similar human experience is. A positive attitude to any language learning and language use gives us a wider picture of how and why linguistic knowledge is important. In the same way we are still (funnily enough!!!) concerned whether the certain proficiency in English is enough for our children to succeed in the big wide world, we should think about other, demographically more widely spread languages than English our children would benefit from (Chinese, Spanish, Arabic etc.). We should acknowledge that the world communicates in an enormous number of languages. The natural way of being bilingual or multilingual is something we (born into one European language) could start learning from people who are born with and into two or more linguistic realities.

The ambitious boy I opened this text with finished his lyrics and found the most suitable synonyms for the verbs he initially did not understand. In this process, he gained a lot. He learned five different synonyms for one verb, and he learned that he could rely on the poetics and onomatopoeic features of the Finnish language in his future writing of rap lyrics. He also learned to be patient with acquiring a new lexicon, because it is an (linguistic) investment. Every single word, every verb, synonym, and rhyme will take him deeper into the Finnish rap scene. Some would call this migrant integration while others would call this one more happy and satisfied young person finding his place in this world of oh, so many languages we could still learn.

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(language, learning, rap, identity, music workshops)

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